

Finance and Public Administration Committee
10th Meeting, Session 6
Tuesday 10 March 2026

Public administration in government

Purpose

1. The Committee is invited to take evidence from Joe Griffin, Permanent Secretary to the Scottish Government and Scottish Government officials on issues relating to public administration in government¹.
2. The Committee has held annual evidence sessions on public administration with the Permanent Secretary since 2022, hearing from Mr Griffin on [24 June 2025](#)², and his predecessor, John-Paul Marks, on [18 March 2025](#), [21 May 2024](#), [16 May 2023](#), and [3 May 2022](#).

Permanent Secretary role and priorities

Role

3. The Scottish Government's website explains that "as the most senior civil servant in Scotland, the Permanent Secretary is the principal policy adviser to the First Minister and Secretary to the Scottish Cabinet", as well as being the principal accountable officer for the Scottish Government. This includes "management of the Scottish Government's budget of circa £59 billion and the economic, efficient and effective use of all related resources".
4. The Permanent Secretary leads more than 9,000 civil servants, "supports the development, implementation and communication of government policies" and ensures "this work is undertaken in accordance with the Civil Service Code, upholding its four core values of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality".³

Priorities

5. Mr Griffin highlighted his priorities as the new Permanent Secretary during evidence to the Committee on 24 June 2025, including—
 - Realising the organisational vision of creating a civil service that is "dynamic, diverse and connected".

¹ The public administration element of the Committee's remit aims to provide "oversight and scrutiny of the way in which government exercises its overall functions and the quality and standards of administration provided by the civil service in the Scottish Government".

² This session was held shortly after Mr Griffin's appointment as Permanent Secretary on 7 April 2025. Mr Griffin previously worked as the Scottish Government's Director General, Strategy and External Affairs.

³ [Role of Permanent Secretary](#)

- Delivering an outward focus, as “one of the best ways of being able to advise Ministers, linking statistical and analytical evidence with lived experience and understanding the practical connections between and across areas that are otherwise potentially siloed”.
- Taking a long-term view, through “recent publications that set out our analysis of future trends and the need to improve population health and [the] medium-term financial strategy and related delivery plan”, and reform of the national performance framework (NPF). He said that Ministers are trying to “simplify the vision of what we are trying to achieve” with the NPF and that “it should be used as a much more vibrant tool and indicator of our performance”.
- As part of public service reform, leading change “with kindness and skill, taking people with us but also with the determination to do the right thing”.
- A commitment to openness and transparency.
- Continuing to strengthen medium-term financial planning, accountable officer assessments and “providing good advice to ministers on options to live sustainably while driving economic and social value from the Scottish Government’s £60 billion budget”.

Civil service workforce

6. Asked about the Scottish Government’s plans to reduce civil service workforce numbers, the Permanent Secretary responded, “I do not have a figure for the optimal size”, adding “I believe that we can make some reductions [and] we have already started on that journey; we are down some 5% over the course of the past three years”.
7. Committee Members also noted that the Scottish Government may have a disproportionate number of civil service staff who are managers or team leaders and who have small numbers of line reports. The Permanent Secretary said that the Government is considering statistics on the number of people who are line managers and the number whom they [in turn,] line manage, “which is relatively small by industry standards”.
8. During evidence to the Committee on [30 September 2025](#), Scottish Government officials confirmed that “the Permanent Secretary is very much focused on the expectation of a 20% reduction in admin costs [in the civil service] over a five-year period”. In a follow-up [letter dated 7 November 2025](#), the Cabinet Secretary confirmed that annualised Scottish Government corporate costs will reduce by approximately £1 billion, representing around 20% of operating costs. This, she said, “could be translated as 4% reductions per year, however a specified breakdown of proposed reductions has not been annualised in this way”. She went on to say this “builds on work underway since 2022 which has seen the core Scottish Government’s contingent workforce reduce by 48% and slowed growth in directly employed staffing from 13.5% in the year to March 2022 to 0.8% in the year to March 2025”.
9. In a [letter to the Committee of 27 November 2025](#), the Minister for Public Finance said that “determining the optimal size of the Scottish Government requires constant attention to ensure balance across workforce levels, financial

constraints, and the delivery of the government’s programme”. He added that “these considerations are a regular feature of my discussions with the Permanent Secretary and are central to the deliberations of his Executive Team”.

10. Committee Members have continued to question the deliverability of the Scottish Government’s workforce reduction targets, particularly given the trajectory of staff numbers has in recent years been going in the opposite direction. The Scottish Government has indicated that additional staff were required during the Covid-19 pandemic and to deliver areas that had seen further devolution, such as additional taxes and social security. However, the Herald newspaper reported in August 2025 that spending on Scottish Government communications staff had also increased from £2.256m in 2013-14 to £4.498m in 2024-25, which it suggests is 30% higher than during the Covid pandemic. Communications staff includes 17 special advisers, six more than ten years ago.⁴
11. During evidence to the Committee on [27 January 2026](#), the Cabinet Secretary provided up-to-date figures on workforce, including a reduction in civil service staff of 1.6% in the 12 months to September 2025, which she said is “the largest reduction in the directly employed workforce in a 12-month period since 2012”. She also said that detailed work “to deliver reasonable workforce reductions, which now have to be delivered [and are] essentially [...] baked into the assumptions that are being made about the funding”.
12. Further details of the Scottish Government’s latest expectations around workforce as set out in the Scottish Spending Review are included later in this paper.

Hybrid working and a four-day week

13. On 24 June 2025, the Committee also asked the Permanent Secretary about the reported resistance from some civil servants to return to the office after the Covid-19 pandemic. Mr Griffin said, “we are now going through a process to ensure that people will be together [in the office] at least two days a week from October [2025]”. He noted that some people “have reacted to that decision, and I understand some of the anxieties that they have”, adding “[...] we are interested in going further in due course [...] but for now we want to secure the two days”.
14. Based on figures obtained regarding the occupancy of office space and reports that some staff are reluctant to return to the office, the Herald newspaper recently suggested that the Scottish Government’s hybrid policy “is not working”.⁵ The newspaper reports, for example, that St Andrew’s House had an occupancy rate of 29.2% in November 2025, and attendance at some other sites are not reaching 20%. Reports of complaints from some civil servants regarding the hybrid working policy also recently appeared in the Herald newspaper.⁶
15. [Civil Service World reported on 28 August 2025](#) that the Minister for Public Finance, Ivan McKee MSP, “has ruled out the possibility of the Scottish

⁴ [Alarm as cost of First Minister spin doctor army hits £4.5m | The Herald](#)

⁵ [Civil servants rarely in office despite 40 per cent target | The Herald](#)

⁶ [Civil servants furious at new working rules](#)

Government moving to a four-day week, despite a pilot programme finding that switching to a shorter working week brought both productivity and wellbeing benefits”.

16. During the pilot, all staff at the Accountant in Bankruptcy and South of Scotland Enterprise were given the opportunity to work a 32-hour, four-day week. An evaluation of the pilot by the Autonomy Institute found “an increase in productivity in both organisations, alongside wellbeing improvements across a range of measures”. The article quotes the Minister saying that the Scottish Government and its agencies “will not be moving to a 32-hour week” [...], instead the pilot has identified several examples of more efficient and innovative working practices, which will be made available to the wider public sector to help drive reform”.

Delays in publishing key financial documents

17. The Committee’s concerns regarding repeated delays in publishing key financial planning documents were also raised with the Permanent Secretary on 24 June 2025. He told the Committee he has “a lot of sympathy” with its concerns, though “sometimes, there are very good reasons for a delay”.
18. He went on to say that the Scottish Government has “sharpen[ed] up our delivery discipline with the creation of a delivery unit” and that “the programme of government is supported by a dashboard that shows us whether we are on track and so on”. He suggested however that “more capability building needs to happen”.

Other issues raised at the June 2025 session

19. Other issues raised at the June 2025 session included productivity levels in the civil service, the Scottish Government’s use of framework bills, its removal of Whatsapp and other mobile messaging services for government business, bids under the Invest to Save Fund, use of artificial intelligence, and the Scottish Government’s response to the Supreme Court judgement that a woman is defined by biological sex under equalities law.

Committee inquiries relating to public administration

20. The Committee has undertaken inquiries into the following issues relating to public administration and may therefore wish to use this final session to raise relevant outstanding matters with the Permanent Secretary on 24 February—
 - [Effective decision-making within the Scottish Government](#) (2023). The Committee recommended that the Scottish Government consider whether to provide long-term insight briefings on the challenges Scotland faces over the next 50 years. This recommendation was accepted and the first such briefing – [Future Trends for Scotland](#) - was published in June 2025. The Committee also raised the impact of churn amongst civil servants and Scottish Ministers, and the need for greater oversight of and

accountability for the quality of decision-making across the Scottish Government.

- [National Performance Framework \(NPF\): ambitions into action](#) (2022). The Committee recommended that all government policies, strategies and legislation set out how they will deliver NPF outcomes, and that an implementation plan is developed as part of the next statutory review. In 2024, the [Committee led the Parliament's scrutiny of proposed national outcomes](#) as part of the statutory review. The Scottish Government thereafter announced a more comprehensive overhaul of the NPF. The Deputy First Minister confirmed in a [letter to the Committee of 16 February 2026](#) that feedback is being sought on proposed changes, with a view to preparing “a final proposal for the next government to consider following the election”.
- [Public service reform \(PSR\)](#) (2023). Building on the Committee's 2023 inquiry, the Committee has continued to monitor progress with the Scottish Government's PSR programme throughout this session, examining regular updates from the Scottish Government. The [latest update was provided on 27 January 2026](#). Some recent developments on PSR are also referred to later in this paper.
- [Scotland's Commissioner landscape](#) (2024). The Committee identified that significant changes were needed to create a more strategic and coherent Commissioner landscape in Scotland. It recommended a dedicated Committee be established to build on this work and make recommendations on what a future landscape should look like. [Its recommendations](#) were approved by Parliament which [resolved](#) that the SPCB supported body landscape should not be expanded to include new advocacy-type SPCB supported bodies; a two-tier criteria should be created comprising justification and effectiveness tests; and a committee should be given responsibility for accountability and scrutiny of SPCB supported bodies as a pilot exercise in Session 7.⁷
- [Cost-effectiveness of Scottish public inquiries](#) (2025): The Committee recommended that statutory public inquiries are only set up when alternatives have been exhausted, chairs other than judges should be considered, a defined budget and timescale for the inquiry is set at the outset, and a robust, transparent system for tracking and reporting on implementation of recommendations is put in place. The Scottish Government response fell short of accepting many key recommendations.⁸

21. The Committee's early annual evidence sessions with the Permanent Secretary also focused on considering progress with the Scottish Government's continuous improvement programme developed in response to the Parliamentary inquiry and

⁷ On 18 September 2025.

⁸ However, during the [Committee's debate on this report on 26 February 2026](#), the Deputy First Minister said, “I think that there are routes to implementing all the Committee's recommendations”.

associated independent reports into the handling of a high-profile harassment case.

22. This programme included developing a new procedure for handling complaints about Ministers in early 2022 and a staff grievance policy in April 2022. A Propriety and Ethics Directorate was established within the Scottish Government “to provide corporate oversight of and co-ordination on sensitive and cross cutting issues affecting the Scottish Government as a whole”. The [final update regarding progress with the continuous improvement programme was provided to the Committee on 17 May 2024](#).

Recent developments

Public sector workforce and pay

23. The Scottish Government’s [Multi-year Pay Policy Framework 2025-26](#) provides that pay should not increase by more than a total of 9% over the three years between 2025-26 to 2027-28 and that “any employer that does not agree a three-year pay deal will be restricted to a maximum 3% pay uplift for 2025-26”. SPICE in its briefing on [Public Sector Pay Policy – Challenges Ahead?](#) published on 9 December 2025 highlighted that “the pay deals that have subsequently been agreed by Scottish public sector employers do not meet the expectation within the policy framework of either covering the three-year period or being restricted to a maximum 3% pay lift for 2025-26”.
24. The Scottish Government published an [Integrated Pay and Workforce Policy \(IPWP\)](#) alongside the Scottish Budget 2026-27, which repeats the earlier Framework in setting “an overall pay envelope of 9% over 3 years with a cap of 3% for any single-year deal”. The IPWP “is the first step in operationalising the commitments in the Fiscal Sustainability Delivery Plan to manage the public sector pay bill and workforce size through a co-ordinated approach to pay and workforce planning”. The IPWP notes “the Cabinet Secretary [...] has acknowledged that many multi-year deals cover only two years of the three-year [Public Sector Pay] Policy for 2025-26 to 2027-28, [...] and] to address this, the Cabinet Secretary has committed to review the pay policy as part of the 2027-28 Budget process”. The future policy to be published alongside the Scottish Budget 2027-28 “will include recognition of the connection between pay policy and workforce management as dual drivers of fiscal sustainability”.
25. The SFC’s January 2026 forecasts highlight particular risks around public sector pay. Achieving the Scottish Government’s current target to reduce the overall devolved public sector workforce by an average of 0.5% a year from 2025-26 to 2029-30 would, according to the SFC, “require a significant departure from recent trends”. It also notes that if pay awards are higher than the Scottish Government has assumed, larger workforce reductions would be needed to keep the paybill at the level used in the SSR.⁹

⁹ [Scotland’s Economic and Fiscal Forecasts – January 2026 | Scottish Fiscal Commission](#)

26. Commenting on the IPWP, the FDA Union said, “by linking pay rises to workforce reductions, the Scottish Government is creating a permanent squeeze on staffing while simultaneously asking civil servants to deliver more efficiencies and more reform”. It goes on to say that “protecting frontline services by hollowing out the professional and managerial capacity behind them is not sustainable, and it risks weakening the quality, resilience and accountability of public services across Scotland”.¹⁰
27. During evidence to the Committee on [24 February](#), witnesses said they would welcome clarity on which roles are considered to be ‘frontline’ and which are defined as ‘back office’ in the context of the Scottish Government’s workforce reduction targets.

Portfolio efficiency and reform plans

28. Annex B of the Scottish Spending Review sets out portfolio efficiency and reform plans for Scottish Government portfolio areas and public bodies. This is part of the Scottish Government’s [Public Service Reform Strategy: Delivering for Scotland](#) (published in June 2025) which sets out “commitments to change the system of public services - to be preventative, to better join up and to be efficient - in order to better deliver for people [... and] how we will tackle systemic barriers to change”. The Strategy includes 18 workstreams including on Shared Services, Workforce, Data Collection, and Scaling Intelligent Automation. As noted above, the Minister for Public Finance’s [latest update on progress with the public service reform programme](#) was provided on 27 January 2026.
29. The Scottish Government intends to make £1.5 billion of cumulative efficiencies across the SSR period. The majority of the savings set out in the plans (£384m in 2026-27, £374m in 2027-28, and £303m in 2028-2029) are to be achieved in the health and social care portfolio, mainly through the existing target of 3% recurring savings across core funding for NHS Boards. The Committee heard from NHS Scotland on 24 February 2026 that delivering this target “will be really difficult [...] but on the current trajectory is achievable”.¹¹
30. In its Scottish Budget 2026-27 Report, the Committee said it shares the view of witnesses who expressed concerns regarding the extent to which the targets set out in the Scottish Government’s portfolio efficiency and reform plans are achievable within the timescales proposed. The Committee welcomed the incentive provided to organisations to carry out reforms in the knowledge they will be able to retain their savings. However, it went on to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that all savings made are reported regularly to allow scrutiny of progress towards its overall targets, and that these reports include details of any impact on public service delivery.¹²

¹⁰ [Integrated Public Sector Pay and Workforce Policy 'quietly hard-wires job losses into pay' creating 'permanent squeeze' on staff, says FDA - FDA](#)

¹¹ [Meeting of the Parliament: pa/24/02/2026 | Scottish Parliament Website](#)

¹² [Report on the Scottish Budget 2026-27 | Scottish Parliament](#)

Prevention

31. During [evidence-taking on the Scottish Budget 2026-27](#), the Scottish Government's Director of Public Spending explained that the Scottish Government is in a process of 'budget-tagging' preventative spend "across all level 4s", while also engaging some NHS Boards and local government in this work. The Scottish Government hopes to be in a position to roll out budget-tagging in time for the 2027-28 Scottish Budget.
32. In its Scottish Budget 2026-27 Report¹³, the Committee sought further information on how this 'budget-tagging' method will work in practice, including evaluating what has been achieved, even for those longer-term programmes. In response, the Scottish Government explained that this is a pilot process which is expected to conclude in Quarter 2 of 2026, "after which a methodology will be agreed with partners that can be used as part of a wider approach across the full Scottish Budget". It will then "consider where possible available evaluation evidence that can be used to support the classification of preventative activities".¹⁴
33. In his latest update on the public service reform programme dated 27 January 2026, the Minister for Public Finance highlighted that £17m of the £30m Fund was allocated in 2025-26 "to support a range of local authority, Scottish Government and public body bids". The Committee has questioned whether the level of funding would provide the transformational results as quickly as is required. Applications for the next round were due to be invited by early February 2026.
34. During scrutiny of the Spring Budget Revision on [17 February 2026](#), the Minister explained that "we have had some uptake [... for the Fund], which is good, and a number of very successful projects [...] however, because it is quite a different way of budgeting and deploying resources, portfolios are working at pace to get their heads round how they engage with the process". He went on to say that "we have learned some lessons this year as to how we can increase take-up going forward".

Openness and transparency

35. In its Report on the Scottish Budget 2026-27, the Committee said it "recognises the improvements made by the Scottish Government throughout this parliamentary session on presenting budgetary information". It went on to say, "however, like our witnesses and other experts, we are frustrated and disappointed that despite repeated requests, the Scottish Government has fallen short of baselining all routine in-year transfers".¹⁵
36. The Scottish Government response highlighted progress made in baselining recurring transfers, while noting "it is ultimately for Ministers to decide on how any figures should be presented". The response went on to say that it "will continue to

¹³ [Report on the Scottish Budget 2026-27 | Scottish Parliament](#)

¹⁴ [Report on Budget Scrutiny 202627 Scottish Government response | Scottish Parliament Website](#)

¹⁵ [Report on the Scottish Budget 2026-27 | Scottish Parliament](#)

discuss issues around transparency of presentation and discuss with the SFC any areas where we can strengthen the process of information-sharing ahead of the next Scottish Budget”, including “the potential for revisions to the jointly-agreed Protocol for Engagement between the Scottish Fiscal Commission and the Scottish Government”.¹⁶

37. [The Scottish Government confirmed in July 2025](#) that in the calendar year 2024, 5995 valid Freedom of Information (FOI) requests were submitted to the Scottish Government and that within that period, the requestor with the most requests submitted 527 requests.

38. In February 2026, the Scottish Information Commissioner (SIC) initiated legal proceedings against the Scottish Government for failure to comply with an initial deadline of 15 January 2026 and subsequent deadline of 22 January 2026 for providing communications and information relating to the James Hamilton Report and associated published legal advice. The SIC said that his instruction to commence “our non-compliance procedures follow a late intimation to me that the Scottish Government would fail to meet the deadline set”. He added “I am of the view that the Scottish Government practice of last-minute communication on cases relating to the Hamilton Inquiry reflects poorly on the Ministers and disrespects the applicant and wider Scottish public on a matter of significant public interest”.¹⁷

39. The Scottish Government [released 18 batches of documents relating to the ruling](#) on 24 February 2026.

40. On 5 March 2026, the Herald newspaper reported that the SIC now wishes to meet with the Permanent Secretary to discuss concerns over the handling for these cases. The SIC is quoted as saying “the shambolic handling of these cases by Scottish Government continues”. A spokesperson for the SIC is also reported to have said that “the Commissioner will be considering whether a third intervention is appropriate – with the unprecedented step of requiring the Scottish Government to cover the cost of this – to address and resolve the serious issues which have come to light through our James Hamilton Inquiry cases”.¹⁸

Futures thinking

41. The Committee, in its pre-budget 2026-27 Report, sought reflections from the Cabinet Secretary on Lithuania’s approach to collectively developing and implementing Lithuania 2050, that nation’s vision for the future, with a parliamentary committee monitoring progress towards achieving the vision.¹⁹

42. At the Committee’s request, Scottish Government officials have since met with officials from the Lithuanian Government, including the Strategic Analysis Centre (STRATA), to learn more about the Lithuania 2050 approach. The Scottish

¹⁶ [Report on Budget Scrutiny 2026/27 Scottish Government response | Scottish Parliament Website](#)

¹⁷ [Compliance warning issued to Scottish Government | Scottish Information Commissioner](#)

¹⁸ [Salmond files: Commissioner seeks top civil servant meeting | The Herald](#)

¹⁹ [Pre-budget 2026-27 Report](#)

Government has committed to giving “full consideration to any applicable lessons from the Lithuania 2050 approach and other international good practice”.²⁰

Potential challenges for the civil service

43. In an [article in Civil Service World dated 5 January 2026](#), the Permanent Secretary was asked about the main challenges facing the Scottish Government in 2026. He responded that the challenging fiscal context “requires stronger creativity and collaboration to drive progress across our policy and delivery priorities”.
44. He went on to say that preparing for the Scottish Parliament election “[...] is a moment where the civil service really comes into its own [...] and] is also an opportunity, whatever the election outcome, in the new parliamentary term to be clear on the government’s approach to addressing the public policy challenges of our age”.
45. A report from [Our Scottish Future](#) published in December 2025 also highlighted key challenges facing Scotland and views on the Scottish Government’s performance. Some of its recommendations relate to the civil service, including introducing a limit on the number of ministers and special advisers, “markedly cutting the latter”; reducing the overall size of central government; reviewing the management structure of the Scottish Government; investing in civil servants’ training, “perhaps via a new UK school of government”, and creating “a more effective central financial function”. The report also included “a potential recommendation [...] for discussion – would greater openness in civil service advice improve the quality of government?”

Next steps

46. The Committee will consider and publish its legacy report, including issues relating to its public administration remit, before the end of the parliamentary session.

Committee Clerking Team
March 2026

²⁰ [Letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government to the Convener of 11 February 2026](#)